

Spyware Bill Advances in U.S. House

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Legislation that would provide computer users more protection from so-called "spyware" that infiltrates systems, tracks users and can even lead to identity theft cleared the U.S. House Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection sub-committee Feb. 16.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, the sub-committee's ranking Democrat, welcomed the move Wednesday.

"At every stage, this was a bi-partisan effort, because I don't think there's any computer anywhere that hasn't been affected by spyware," she said, predicting that Congress would easily pass the act into law.

Schakowsky's sub-committee held hearings into spyware problems during 2004 and crafted the current proposal during the last Congress. House Resolution 29, the "Securely Protect Yourself Against Cyber Trespass Act," or Spy Act, must next pass muster in the full Commerce Committee. Congress reconvenes next week and the legislation could be reviewed then or the subsequent week, according to Schakowsky's office.

Schakowsky, whose district includes Skokie and Lincolnwood, called the bill strong consumer

protection against the misuse of software programs designed to track or monitor a computer user's Web activity, or collect personal information from their computer files without their knowledge or consent.

Such information collection software programs, commonly known as spyware, are often surreptitiously installed and noticeable through such things as slow processing times, changed homepages or non-stop pop-up advertising.

But the programs, by doing things such as tracking keystrokes, or taking snapshots of what is on a computer user's screen at any given time, can track exactly where users go, including their own computerized bank accounts.

The act prohibits using software to take snapshots of computer screens, or logging keystrokes without computer users' knowledge and consent. It gives consumers the choice to opt-in to the installation or activation of such software, but only when they know what information will be collected and how it will be used.

People using spyware can steal bank codes and passwords, and is, Schakowsky said, "a potentially powerful tool for identity theft, the fastest growing financial crime."

She said that as more American consumers rely on the Internet, and use computers to handle personal and business affairs, consumer protection laws must be updated to match new technologies such as spyware.